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POINTS OF REFERENCE:

THE PRESS AND THE
VOLUNTARY SECTOR

by

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Ottawa

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1. Introduction

This study endeavours to analyse and interpret the attitude of the press toward voluntary action in Canada.

How have certain groups managed to secure the valuable support of the press? What factors determine that one voluntary organization will receive more attention than another in the newspapers?

Another aspect we shall examine is the financing of voluntary groups as seen by the press. How do government budget cuts affect the voluntary organizations? What attitude does the press take toward the different methods and standards of financing voluntary organizations? Should the public be better informed?

We shall also see how the bias of a newspaper can affect coverage of the voluntary sector. How do newspapers perceive their responsibilities toward the public and the voluntary sector?

We also attempt to describe the changes now occurring in newspaper coverage of the voluntary sector. Is the public better informed about the voluntary sector than before? Does media coverage make it easier to recruit volunteers?

We shall also examine the nature of a news item from the voluntary sector. Are articles published in newspapers on voluntary action of a human interest, social, political or sensational nature, and so on?

Our research method was as follows. We had at our disposal several files accumulated over about a year by the National Advisory Council on Voluntary Action (NACVA). These files contained articles from different newspapers on the subject of the voluntary sector.

We read the articles in the files, retaining and summarizing the most important ones. This enabled us to form a general opinion as to the attitude of the press toward the voluntary sector.

Our main sources of information were *The Globe and Mail*, *The Citizen* (Ottawa), *Le Droit* (Ottawa), *Le Devoir* (Montreal), *La Presse* (Montreal) and the *Toronto Star*. These make up what some would call varied samples.

In all, the files covered around 350 articles collected over a period of eighteen months, from February 1975 to September 1976.

It will be obvious to the reader of this report that our study is far from exhaustive. Our information sources do not allow for this. Instead, this study seeks to be the starting point for other research to be done in greater depth by examining the media and voluntary action more minutely.

2. Social responsibility and voluntary action

The press recognizes its primary role of informing the public. It therefore has a measure of social responsibility. This means that it must present the news honestly, completely and accurately. Its role is not only to present events but also to interpret and explain them for the public.

However, besides providing information to the public, the press is one of the advertising media. These two facets of its role can often cause more or less serious conflicts.

Some newspapers have reached the point where they see their role as being primarily to provide advertising in order to amass capital, articles being used only to "fill in the gaps". This is the case, for example, with the *Journal de Montréal*, for whom this format has been an undeniable success. Its circulation exceeds a million copies a day and reaches a market of 2.5 million persons, which is exceptional in the industry.

The press is also bound by market constraints since it works in a capitalistic society in Canada. So, a newspaper like *Le Droit* endeavours first to serve Franco-Ontarians, but must take into consideration the fact that sixty-five per cent of its readers are drawn from Hull, on the Quebec side.

Newspapers must consider the profit factor in their activities, therefore. Given an article which provides a description of a service offered by a voluntary organization and another which reports on a press conference given by the mayor, the newspaper will certainly choose the latter because it is likely to interest a greater number of people. People must buy a newspaper in order for it to survive. The greater the circulation a newspaper has, the more people it claims as readers, the better advertising rates it can then seek.

Nowadays, there are very few so-called "action" newspapers with wide circulation. These are newspapers whose primary goal is to defend a specific cause, such as *Le Droit* of Ottawa in its infancy. The days of Fleury Mesplet, founder of the *Montreal Gazette*, are long gone. In short, we believe that the last true action newspaper disappeared in August 1976. This was *Le Jour*, a newspaper that tried to spread the ideology of separatism throughout Quebec. It did not survive market constraints.

However, action newspapers could have been the best medium for distributing information on voluntary organizations. Those who undertake to create a community service are rarely conservatives and their attitude may closely approximate that expressed, for example, in the type of newspaper at first published by *Le Droit*, to protest against Regulation 17 which prohibited French public schools in Ontario. At that time, the newspaper endeavoured primarily to represent the interests of Franco-Ontarians just as Birthright

tries to represent the interests of unborn Canadian citizens. An action newspaper and a voluntary organization therefore complement one another.

Thus, coverage by the press of the voluntary sector, like any other sector, is affected by the factors we have just mentioned - responsibility, advertising, profitability, bias, and so forth. Other factors may also come into play, such as, for example, the availability of news on the voluntary sector, but we shall return to this later.

Some organizations can hardly expect to receive press coverage because the goals they pursue come in direct conflict with the goals of the newspapers. For example, in the last few years, anti-advertising groups have been formed in Canada and the United States as a result of the spectacular growth of advertising since the birth of television and radio. It is certain that a newspaper will have great reservations about publishing an article on an organization that directly attacks the newspaper's very sources of financing.

For example, the CBC recently refused to approve an announcement on television for the Quebec Consumer Protection Bureau and the Caisses Populaires, in which the public was warned to use discretion in analysing statements contained in certain advertisements. Of course, this announcement did not originate with a voluntary group. However, if state television is this sensitive about advertising, private television and the press cannot be expected to be less so.

Nevertheless, the voluntary sector is covered in most newspapers. The attention given to voluntary organizations varies, however, according to political bias and content definition of the various newspapers.

So, a "news" newspaper like the *Ottawa Journal* which does practically no analysis, except in the editorial, will present an article on the voluntary sector only when the "news" or sensational element is obviously present.

Analytical newspapers such as the *Globe and Mail*, *Le Devoir* and, in a broader sense, the *Ottawa Citizen*, approach the voluntary sector differently. These newspapers are addressed to a more intellectual class of readers, who wish to cross the threshold of mere news and obtain more complete information on what is happening around the news. The newspapers must, therefore, explore the areas they cover in greater depth.

In the area of the voluntary sector, the articles they publish may take on a human character, such as the article published in the *Globe and Mail* on the Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario, Mrs Pauline McGibbon, who has worked a great deal in the voluntary sector. They may also assume a political aspect, such as the whole question of native rights in Canada. So it is that in the analytical newspapers we find a more cohesive coverage of the voluntary sector.

Variations in political bias between the various newspapers in Canada are so slight that it becomes difficult to determine how these leanings can influence editorial decisions in the newspapers. Ordinarily, three persons will decide which news items will or will not be carried in the newspaper. Initially, the journalist decides which points he will include in his article; then the editor, who corrects the texts, will sort the material on hand; and lastly, the news director or editor-in-chief may still intervene. We can, therefore, conclude that the same process applies to news items dealing with the voluntary sector.

3. Factors influencing coverage of the voluntary sector

Several factors may influence members of the press in deciding whether or not to cover certain aspects of the voluntary sector.

The fact that a voluntary group provides services to the community is not enough to ensure that its contribution will be discussed in the newspapers. The organization must also champion a cause or special interest. Thus, the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) does more than help the blind person participate actively in society. The CNIB also ensures that the rights of the blind are pointed out to the appropriate authorities. It insists that blind people are not only capable of working, but also have a right to work.

Controversy, interests and outside factors

Another important factor that ensures that the voluntary sector receives special attention from the press is controversy. A group may defend an idea for a very long time but it will come to nothing if that idea does not arouse interest in society, or if it does not affect enough people or is not real enough. This was the problem with the Canadian Legion in particular, which saw its members' numbers dwindle visibly, as the result of a period of peace unprecedented in history. In order to surmount the problem, the Legion decided to increase opportunities for recruitment into the organization.

This decision interested the press for two major reasons. First, the move aroused some controversy: would the Canadian Legion lose its own identity? As well, the attempt at reorganization updated the objectives and interests of the Legion. By deciding to accept members who are not necessarily

veterans, the Legion was making it possible for new trends and ideas to reach the organization.

Outside factors will often create a controversy. The native emancipation movement would probably not have reached the scale it has today if it had not been for major events arousing the public's interest. We need only remember the demands made by the InnuIt and Indians at James Bay when the Quebec government began construction on the hydro-electric dam. The appearance of the Minamata Disease, mercury poisoning, also made it possible for Indians in north-west Quebec to arouse controversy. The discussions surrounding the Mackenzie River pipeline construction project provided the Indians with another arena for discussion. All these events enabled the Indians and InnuIt to support their claims with concrete examples.

As well, a voluntary group can create a controversy, often unintentionally, by problems that may occur within the organization itself. For example, OXFAM, an organization that tries to combat underdevelopment throughout the world, received a great deal of attention from the press when problems of personal and administrative conflict developed within its Executive Council.

Of course, in such cases, the organizations concerned would prefer to wash their dirty linen in private without the interference of the press. However, this type of news interests people and we have already stated that the press has a responsibility toward its readers.

This is the basis for the most common criticism of the press: that is, when services are provided adequately and all goes well, the media say nothing. However, as soon as a problem appears, the press wants to know everything.

The plan of action of certain voluntary groups

Some voluntary groups have developed actual plans of action and are past masters of the art of drawing the attention of the press to their activities.

For example, the various groups demanding rights for Indians, Métis and Inuit have taken several dramatic steps which had the result of drawing the newspapers' attention to their problems.

We need only mention the Dene Declaration, a veritable bomb in government circles and with the public. Here again, it was the situation of controversy and conflict that ensured the presence of the press. These groups realized that by creating such situations they ensure themselves of the attention, if not the support, of the newspapers, and that is the most important thing.

Other groups have also realized that the press conference is one of the most effective means of attracting journalists. Moreover, this method is more effective than the press release. We know from personal experience that press releases are very frequently put aside and forgotten, for lack of time to translate them. On the other hand, the press conference makes it possible for journalists to come and communicate directly with the persons involved and thus obtain more direct information. The press conference is therefore more popular in the newspaper world.

Obviously, holding a press conference poses more organizational problems than writing a press release. A location must be found for the conference, the meeting must be publicized, a sound system obtained, and so on.

4. The press and financing of voluntary groups

Most voluntary organizations are financed either by direct or indirect public contributions, or by government grants. Recently, according to what we read in newspaper articles, these methods of financing have been questioned.

Several factors are involved in the newspapers' handling of the question of financing.

For the last two years, certain disclosures indicating that "voluntary" organizations were spending more than eighty per cent of money collected on administration but only twenty per cent on services have resulted in the public demanding that voluntary organizations divulge more information on their financial situation.

In its August 7, 1975 edition, the Toronto *Globe and Mail* published an article in which Professor Samuel Martin, an economist and accountant, stated that the public had the right to examine the expenditures of charitable organizations. He had arrived at this conclusion through a study he had undertaken on the financing of voluntary organizations.

Professor Martin suggested all voluntary organizations should submit a detailed annual report of their income and expenditures to the government.

Professor Martin also asserted that allowable tax deductions for contributions to charitable organizations should be increased in order to motivate the public to increase its monetary contributions to the voluntary sector.

Generally, most of the newspapers we read backed up this position. That is why United Way of Canada came in for some unflattering comments in certain editorials last year. United Way had proposed that the uniform \$100 deduction allowed by the government for charitable donations be simply abolished. United Way's viewpoint was that very few Canadians reached this maximum in a year.

Although Professor Martin's study seems to bear out this statement, the newspapers that published editorials on the subject were opposed to United Way's suggestion.

In its editorial of June 25, 1975, the *Globe and Mail* stated: "If anything, the government is getting a good deal from the taxpayers, not the other way around. As for the United Way, it is fortunate its annual campaign is still a few months off. It is not using the best public relations to loosen purse strings with a proposal like this."

Effect of government budget cuts on voluntary organizations

Last year, government budget cuts affected a number of voluntary organizations.

The newspapers immediately gave special attention to the voluntary organizations that were in danger of disappearing because they could no longer rely on government grants. The Company of Young Canadians (CYC), which supported a number of voluntary activities, was abolished on March 31, 1976 and received the newspapers' special attention. The prevailing attitude at that time was that the disappearance of voluntary organizations as a result of this change of policies was undesirable.

The disappearance of the CYC is a special case but even so it marked the beginning of a more or less obvious campaign by the newspapers in favour of several voluntary organizations. Thus, when voluntary groups face a precarious financial situation as the result of government restrictions, the newspapers seem to side with the voluntary groups.

In Ottawa, the *Citizen* provided very complete coverage of the Olympic Games for the handicapped that took place in Toronto this summer. During that event, the *Citizen* stressed the fact that the federal government did not provide any subsidies for the Games. The reason for that restriction, however, was that "South African athletes were present at this meet and that Canada supports the international policy of boycotting South Africa".

Nevertheless, the *Globe and Mail*, among others, made a serious effort in late 1975 and early 1976 to present the government's position with respect to the budget restrictions affecting the voluntary sector.

One article, published in March 1976, quoted the Premier of Ontario, Mr William Davis, on this subject. According to Mr Davis, government cuts only encouraged people to undertake projects themselves. In the words of the Premier, people rely too heavily on the government to provide the services they need.

The Premier believed that the public must get away from the attitude that a voluntary project is only worthwhile if it is financed by the government.

The voluntary groups, on the other hand, contend that the government has made commitments toward several projects and is obliged to continue to support these projects.

According to the voluntary organizations, budget restrictions seriously endanger the existence of voluntary action projects. They interpret this as irresponsibility on the part of the government that hurts not only the voluntary sector, but the general public as well.

5. Conclusion

When all is said and done, is the citizen better informed on the voluntary sector than he was before? Can he understand the implications of the voluntary sector and can he see the extent to which this movement has grown in the last ten years?

If the answers to these questions are in the affirmative, then all is well and it can be concluded that the press is adequately performing its role of disseminating information, in the voluntary sector in particular.

If, on the other hand, people are not fully informed, what possibilities are open to the voluntary groups to make themselves better known by the general public?

Journalists, editors and newspaper staff members frequently hear the following criticism: "The newspaper does not pay enough attention to things that go on in my own community, my neighbourhood, my work environment, and so on". We feel that this criticism is justified. It is practically impossible for newspapers to cover the community as intensively as it deserves. There is not enough staff and to hire more would be too much of a burden.

The same criticism applies with respect to the voluntary sector. Newspapers pay a great deal of attention to national and international organizations such as the United Way, OXFAM, CARE, UNESCO and so on. However,

what about groups like neighbourhood associations, services like Meals on Wheels, societies like the "Union des propriétaires d'animaux d'Ottawa"?

The limited area in which these organizations operate prevent their activities from being covered in the big newspapers because they do not involve enough people. We have already discussed this point in section 3. However, there is a solution.

During the last five years, numerous weeklies have appeared on the scene. Their area is often limited to a single neighbourhood, a region of the city, or they may even confine themselves to describing the life of a community such as that of the Portuguese, the Italians and so on.

Their success has been so great that in the area of greater Ottawa alone (population 425,000), there are more than twenty of them. To what can such success be attributed, if not to the fact that these newspapers cover an aspect of the community that is physically beyond the newspapers with wide circulation?

These mini-newspapers may become an excellent outlet for the voluntary groups. Though most of the voluntary activities of the country are financed by central organizations such as the United Way or by government grants, voluntary action remains decentralized. It is often the less important groups providing services to a smaller number of people who accomplish the greatest part of the work. Coverage of their activities may therefore fit in very well in the community newspapers just described.

We spoke of the dual function of newspapers which is to disseminate information and at the same time to provide an outlet for advertising.

In our opinion, the voluntary sector must not direct all its efforts toward being covered by the first aspect of the newspapers' function. Advertis-

ing remains the best way to promote an idea or a product with a greater number of people.

Of course, advertising is expensive and it is not accessible to everyone. The national organizations do not have such problems. United Way, OXFAM and the Canadian National Institute for the Blind have advertising budgets at their disposal and advertise quite regularly.

However, the small organizations do not have such resources at hand to publicize their "product". They often have difficulty even covering their administration costs and services. Buying advertising space in a newspaper is out of the question.

But why shouldn't several voluntary organizations get together to buy advertising? For example, a page of advertising in a city newspaper costs \$2,700. It is, therefore, certainly out of the reach of a group operating on an annual budget of \$50,000. However, if 10 or even 100 organizations decide to get together to buy a page of advertising, the cost per group is not more than \$270 or \$27 and they are practically certain that their advertisement will be read.

The page bought in this way might contain, for example, a list of these organizations and their addresses and telephone numbers. Of course, this is not the ideal way, but who is to say that a marketing expert might not agree to draw up such a page free of charge for this union of voluntary organizations? The regional voluntary action bureau might serve as an intermediary in this whole operation.

To sum up, voluntary groups are not only defending a cause; they are also selling a product - their services. In today's society, a product

that is not advertised is simply left on the shelf. It is important, therefore, that the voluntary organizations act quickly. Certain studies, including that of Professor Martin (see section 4), have shown that Canadians allocate less of their incomes to charitable donations than twenty years ago.

Of course, the governments spend a great deal in the social field - more than twenty-five per cent of their budgets - and this has the effect of creating a dependency syndrome in the public, which feels less obliged to contribute directly to voluntary groups since its tax dollars finance a great part of the voluntary sector.

Nevertheless, this trend is about to reverse and the voluntary organizations will have to see to it that the public takes over responsibility.

In order to achieve this, the voluntary sector will have to develop new strategies, such as those we spoke of in section 2, for approaching the press and the media in general. Although the press is still rather free in our country, it must sometimes be pushed a little into taking action. It may, nevertheless become an important ally of the voluntary sector in the future.



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